

Health Trends

A Quarterly Newsletter for the Northern Arizona VA Health Care System ■ VISN 18

American Sniper Highlights Veterans' Readjustments

By Carolyn J. Greene, Ph.D

Transitioning to civilian life can be extremely challenging. The box-office blockbuster film, *American Sniper*, graphically illustrates just how difficult this transition can be. The movie portrays the true-life story of U.S. Navy SEAL Chris Kyle.

Many Servicemembers and Veterans have commented on how accurate the storytelling and acting is. As Kyle did, many of the men and women who serve our country find themselves feeling isolated, angry or conflicted when they return home, making it difficult to move forward and start the next chapter of their lives.

VA has developed, and continues to develop, resources to help Servicemembers and Veterans navigate the readjustment to civilian life. In addition to in-person resources such as Vet Centers and VA Medical Centers, VA also provides online programs and telephone-based services.

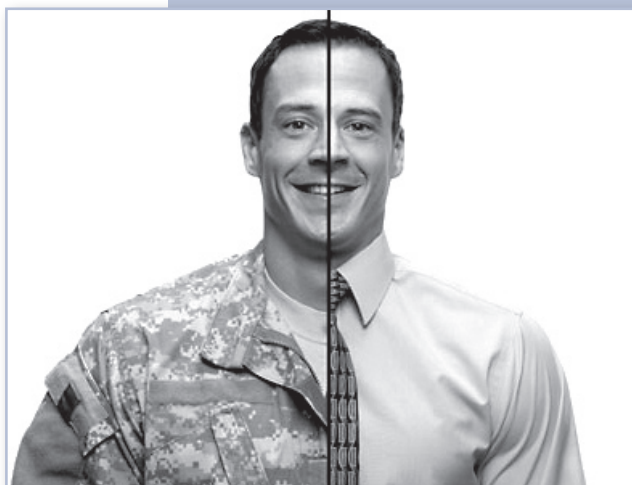
Some of those resources include:

- **Veteran Resource Center** — a trio of free and confidential online training courses created specifically to equip Servicemembers and Veterans with practical skills and tools

they can use daily. These courses are ideal for individuals who want to learn skills at the time, place and pace of their choosing. These interactive courses feature real Veterans and military families who share their stories and offer lessons learned.

The courses are:

- *Moving Forward*: teaches skills to overcome stressful problems such as difficulties transitioning from military to civilian life, balancing work/school and family, coping with physical injuries, and relationship issues.
- *Parenting for Service Members & Veterans*: offers parents ways to reconnect with their children and strengthen their family. It covers everyday parenting and family issues, as well as those unique to the military lifestyle.



- *Anger & Irritability Management (AIMS)*: provides practical tools to better understand anger “triggers,” and to keep control of your reactions during difficult situations. It also teaches communication skills to help you get along better with people.
- **AboutFace** — provides a way to learn about PTSD from Veterans who live with it. Veterans share their stories about the challenges they have faced and how treatment has helped them turn their lives around. Also hear from family members who explain how their lives were improved once their loved ones sought treatment.

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Veterans' Readjustments

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- **Coaching into Care** — offers telephone-based support and coaching for family members who would like to help their Servicemember or Veteran get mental health care treatment. This confidential service can also help military family members learn new ways to talk with their loved ones about the difficulties they face and why treatment can help.

These are just some of the VA resources available to help Servicemembers and Veterans start and improve the next chapter of their lives. Many other important resources — such as Veterans Crisis Line (1-800-273-8255) and Make the Connection — can be found at mentalhealth.va.gov and ptsd.va.gov. ■

VA Secretary Comments on Award-Winning Film

In a recent appearance on the PBS television program, *The Charlie Rose Show*, VA Secretary Robert McDonald commented on the attention brought to today's Veterans by films such as *American Sniper*. Asked about the award winning film, McDonald said it gave the American public a look at what military Veterans have gone through.

"The obvious injuries and wounds are the ones seen by everyone, but those inconspicuous wounds are the ones we often deal with in the VA. I thought it was great to be able to raise that to the American public," McDonald said.



He also pointed out the contributions being made by Veterans. "I don't want the American public to take away that every Veteran is somehow damaged. They aren't. We've got great Veterans who are making substantial contributions to this country." ■

VA Drops Net Worth as Eligibility Factor

Effective 2015, VA eliminated the use of net worth as a determining factor for both health care programs and copayment responsibilities. This change makes VA health care benefits more accessible to lower-income Veterans and brings VA policies in line with Secretary Robert McDonald's MyVA initiative, which reorients VA around Veterans' needs.

Instead of combining the sum of Veterans' income with their assets to determine eligibility, VA will now only consider a Veteran's gross household income and deductible expenses from the previous year. This means certain lower-income, non-service-connected Veterans will have lower out-of-pocket costs. Over a five-year period, up to 190,000 Veterans may become eligible for reduced costs.

In March 2014, VA eliminated the annual requirement for updated financial information. VA now uses information from the IRS and Social Security Administration to automatically match individual Veterans' income information. That change better aligned VA's program with other federal health care organizations.

Veterans may submit updated income information at www.1010ez.med.va.gov/, or by visiting their nearby VA health care facility. For more information, visit www.va.gov/healthbenefits or call VA toll-free at 1-877-222-VETS (8387). ■

Financial Hardship Options

If you're a Veteran struggling to meet your copay obligations or are otherwise in financial distress, the VA has various hardship programs to help you and your family. Personal circumstances, such as job loss, sudden decrease in income, or increases of out-of-pocket family health care expenses may qualify you for some relief.

Your options may include:

- **Repayment Plan:** You can set up a plan to spread your current health care debt over a specified period of time.
- **Compromise:** You can request a one-time settlement eliminating your current health care debt.
- **Waiver:** You can request your current medical copay

debts be waived for charges less than six months old (180 days). If approved, you may qualify to have Beneficiary Travel mileage reimbursement deductibles removed.

If your gross household income has dropped, you may qualify for copayment exemption for the remaining calendar year and enrollment in a higher Priority Group. You may also qualify for cost-free VA medical care, if your household income puts you below the VA National Income Threshold or Geographic Means Test Threshold for your area.

For more information, contact your local VA Medical Center Enrollment Coordinator at 1-877-222 VETS (8387). ■

Online Prescription Tracker

Veterans can now track the status of most of their prescriptions online, thanks to an innovative idea by a VA employee. The new 24/7 service allows online tracking for most prescriptions mailed from the VA Mail Order Pharmacy.

The Prescription Tracker was recommended by VA employee Kenneth Siehr, the National Director for Consolidated Mail Outpatient Pharmacies. "It's an honor to be part of serving Veterans, who deserve a first-class pharmacy and quality customer service as a part of the exceptional health care available from VA," said Siehr.

Thousands of Veterans are currently using the service through My HealtheVet, an online feature that allows Veterans to partner with their health care team. The number is expected to grow as VA educates Veterans about the new feature. Over the next year, a secure messaging alert will be added, so Veterans know when a medication was placed in the mail. ■



VA Expands Choice Program Eligibility

In order to expand eligibility for the Veterans Choice Program, the VA will change the method used to determine the distance between a Veteran's residence and the nearest VA medical facility from a straight line distance to driving distance. Under the new method, a Veteran who lives less than 40 miles, straight line distance, from the nearest VA medical facility, but who needs to physically drive more than 40 miles to get there, would be eligible.

VA is expanding the eligibility determination in order to increase Veterans access to high quality, timely healthcare. "We've determined that changing the distance calculation will help ensure more Veterans have access to care when and where they want it," said VA Secretary Robert McDonald. The change is expected to roughly double the number of eligible Veterans.

A fact sheet on the 40-mile-rule change can be found at www.va.gov/opa/choiceact/documents/FactSheets/March-2015-40-mile-rule-change-factsheet.pdf. ■

Summer 2015

If you are a Veteran who is currently smoking and would like to learn ways to stop this habit, help is available through the Northern Arizona VA Health Care System. Please contact your primary care provider and request a consultation to the Smoking Cessation Program.

HealthTrends is designed to provide general health and wellness information and news about services provided by VISN 18. **HealthTrends** is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, which should be obtained from your health care provider.

To Change Your Address

Contact

928-445-4860 exts. 6223, 6224, 6225 or 7554

Patient Concerns or Issues

Please contact our patient representatives at

928-776-6008

www.prescott.va.gov

Northern Arizona VA Health Care System (135PR)

500 Highway 89 North

Prescott, AZ 86313

HealthTrends

What Happens When You Stop Smoking?

It's never too late to quit and benefit from a smoke-free lifestyle. People who've smoked for decades can notice big changes, starting almost immediately. For example:

- Within 20 minutes, your blood pressure drops to normal;
- Within 8 hours, your smoker's breath disappears;
- Within 24 hours, your chance of a heart attack decreases;
- Within 48 hours, your ability to smell and taste is enhanced;
- Within 72 hours, lung capacity increases, making it easier to do physical activities.

And the improvements continue:

- Within two weeks to three months, walking becomes easier;
- Within one to nine months, coughing, sinus congestion, fatigue and shortness of breath all decrease;

- Within one year, the risk of coronary heart disease is half that of a smoker;
- Within two years, heart attack risk drops to near normal;
- Within five years, the lung cancer death rate decreases by almost half;
- Within 10 years, the lung cancer death rate is similar to that of a lifetime non-smoker.

What's in your cigarette?

Nicotine is a substance found naturally in tobacco that causes feelings of pleasure, relaxation or stimulation and stress reduction. It's the addictive part of tobacco, but is not harmful to your body by itself. The other substances found in tobacco and substances formed when tobacco is burned harm your body. There are more than 7,000 chemicals in tobacco smoke. At least 69 are harmful, and can cause cell damage, cell death and cancer.



How much of your money goes up in smoke?

The average Arizona smoker (1.5 packs daily) spends approximately \$240 per month in cigarettes; that's \$2,900 per year. A heavy smoker (3 packs daily) will spend over \$450 per month, or \$5,400 per year. Over 20 years, that's more than \$100,000. Think what you could do with that!

To learn more, please visit www.smokefree.gov, or contact Dr. Thomas at 928-445-4860, ext. 6837. ■